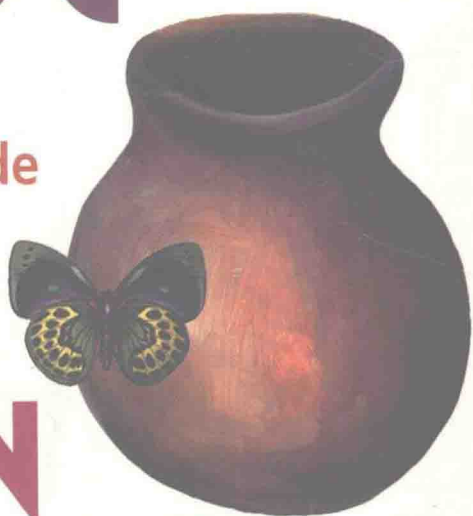


it could be verse

anybody's guide
to Poetry



john
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it couLd be verse

anybody's guide
to Poetry

john timpone



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Introduction to the:

introduction



Dear Reader—or DR—

What if I told you there was *all this stuff*, building up for thousands of years but readily available, that could truly make your life better?

Wouldn't you be curious? Just a little?

What if I added that all sorts of people do it, from cowboys to astronauts, from housewives to bank tellers?

Wouldn't you start to wonder just what this was?

What if I said that it's a very well-kept secret in this country—something that makes many people feel dumb, inadequate, something many people are actually *afraid of*?

But that the great thing is, no one needs to fear it?

Wouldn't a short, enthusiastic how-to book on such a thing deserve a place between *How to Get Perfect Revenge Every Time* and *Families: How to Avoid Them*?

And wouldn't you like to *know* what that thing was?

Okay. I'll tell you—but only if you promise not to put down the book for ten more sentences. Deal? Deal.

It's poetry. (Keep reading. You promised.)

Poetry can make life better. Otherwise, why write it? Why read it?

A changed point of view; a sharpened appreciation of life; a mind learning new things about the world, other people's lives, and your own life—DR, if this were a food, the shelves would be sagging with cookbooks on it. If it were a drug, the FDA would have to license it. And, man, would it be expensive.

Here, we'll look at what there is to *like* about poetry. That will mean learning how to **read aloud**. And how to **pay attention**. If you want the good stuff poetry has—and there is so much good stuff—you have to **DO IT**.

Some work is involved. Not as much as it takes to lose thirty-five pounds. Not as much as it takes to perfect your golf stroke. About as much as it takes to do origami or refine your wine-tasting skills—maybe a little less.


Here are a few of the features of the book.



Anything written in this print is spoken by DR, our Dear Reader. DR voices many of the Person-in-the-Street's doubts and complaints about poetry.

DR and I have little chats throughout the book. Those chats usually happen at very important places.

Throughout, you will see little icons.

First and most important is this one: 

Meaning: **Time to read the indicated poem aloud.**

The whole point of the book is for you to **DO IT**.

Either you will **DO IT** or you won't.

Life will be better if you **DO IT**. So why not? Play along with an open mind and ready spirit. I promise you pleasures.

Another icon is  meaning **Innocent Question**. This marks a question people feel stupid about asking. Note: these are usually extremely smart questions.

But for some reason, people—like DR—feel stupid about asking them. I don't know why. Watch DR's questions get smarter and smarter as time goes by.



A third icon is: **BINGO!** I use this one when a poem really strikes home, hits the nail on the donkey, sets fire to the goat, rips the clothes off the world and slams its head in the door—that is, when a poem really does what poetry is supposed to do: speak the truth, reveal the world. When I can't help myself, I add an **Uh-huh!** or a **You bet!**

Our last icon appears in our section "Sixty-Six Poets: An Appreciator's Guide": **PGR!?** (**Professional Guidance Recommended**). This means that you should take a class to get the most out of the poet being discussed. Most poetry, you can just pick up and read, and good things start happening *inmediatamente!* Right away! Good, good things! But with some poets, professional guidance is your best bet. They are miraculous artists—

but you need a **Fearless Leader** to show you the way.

All right, friends. Let's take 'em to Missouri.



Introduction:

WHY poetry?



If you can't wait to **DO IT**, skip to Chapter One.
At this rate, you'll finish in no time!

For a moment in January 1993, poetry took center on the American stage. Maya Angelou read “On the Pulse of Morning” at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, becoming the first inaugural poet since James Dickey read “The Strength of Fields” at Jimmy Carter’s inauguration in 1977. Not everyone liked Angelou’s poem. But like it or hate it, few were indifferent; all were energized, agitated, challenged. For some (for millions, I bet) the inauguration was the first time in years they had heard a poem recited—perhaps the first time ever outside of school. That teaches us an indispensable truth: **when you actually hear and see a poem performed, it can have a tremendous impact.** It can make you think, uplift you, hurt you, baffle you, change your life.

Angelou reminded America about something America had forgotten: the power of poetry to *move*. Why did we forget? Something about poetry has not gotten across. Somebody messed up somewhere. As a result, most of us aren’t taking advantage of the full range of pleasures our culture provides.

Some blame the schools; some blame TV, pop music, T. S. Eliot. Let’s call the whole thing off. Let’s cut through the sociology in the simplest way we know—by getting you to admit you might enjoy poetry.

Like poetry, DR. All by yourself. For your own reasons. Lose this idea that poetry is somehow not for us.

Sure it is for us.

Who else would it be for?

If you can read—if you can hear—you can enjoy poetry. While it can’t replace the TV, at least it can’t break, and there’s always something on.

American Poetry: It's Everywhere—But Where Is It?



One thing is for sure: poetry is flourishing throughout this republic. More Americans are writing it than ever before. Depending on your definition, there may be up to 25,000 professional poets in the United States.

Ground zero for the poetry explosion is the New American Poetry Reading. In Chicago, Boston, New York, Pittsburgh, Santa Fe, San Jose, all over the country, you might go to readings by poets such as Roberto Duran, Jean Emerson, Carolyn Grassi, Phyllis Koestenbaum, Dale Pendell, or Al Young. (Don't worry if you've never heard of them. Once upon a time, William Shakespeare was just a "Hey, you.") No matter who or what you are, there are poets writing about your world.

On airport walls, on public buildings, on the very sidewalks, poetry makes myriad civic appearances. (At the foot of the Statue of Liberty lie an island and a sonnet.) Rapid Transit Poetry is all over the place. Subways in Philadelphia and Boston have slipped poems among the ads for pizzas and weight-loss clinics. The New York City Metropolitan Transit Authority, together with the Poetry Society of America, now has a program, called Poetry in Motion, for **straphangers**—a captive audience if ever there was one.

There is poetry in the American popular song, the greeting card, the advertisement. Infiniti cars are sold with introspective, inspirational words for the five-figure shopper. A recent Gap ad featured poet Max Blagg reading in a smoky night spot.

Coffeehouses are back, featuring open-mike readings, poetry slams, poetry raves, and poets reading to the sound of jazz. San Francisco's Mission District now hosts a *fin de siècle* version of the 1950s Beat scene. Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and San Diego have their own reading worlds. Coffeehouse poetry is so trendy that it has been satirized on *The Simpsons*.

Even dead poets can pack them in. For the 100th anniversary of the death of Walt Whitman, more than 2,000 people crowded into New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine to hear Walt's

works read by poets such as Galway Kinnell, Gerald Stern, and Sharon Olds.

Lee Upton, poet and teacher at Lafayette College, thinks that the growing popularity of poetry readings says something about the modern condition. “It’s wonderful,” she says, “to have language in front of us that isn’t disposable, isn’t trying to get you to buy something.” Donald Revell, poet and former editor of the *Denver Quarterly*, agrees: “After the trickle-down emptiness of the 1980s, people perhaps wanted some alternative, some substance.”

Imagine millions of schoolkids encouraged to try rhyme, haiku, or free verse; teenagers with their journals; people turning to poetry to help them suffer through or recover from tragedy; the joyous or perplexed who grab pen and paper; the teachers who use poetry to teach medicine, science, engineering, and ethics; the senators, presidents, representatives, and spokespeople who quote poetry to make a point they can make in no other way; and, atop the pop heap, rap.

Hellishly repetitious most of the time, rap has its subtleties. The best rappers, such as the Digable Planets in “Rebirth of Slick,” can take a line such as “I’m cool like dat,” eight times different ways and say eight different things; then they’ll throw in “I’m chill like dat” and “I’m black like dat,” do the same with them, and suddenly you have twenty-four statements, all different, all interrelated. Chauvinist, racist, violent, notorious for exploiting both performers and audience, rap can make you pay attention and deliver you to the truth. Now in its second decade, rap may be on its way out, but it speaks the street, has got a good beat, and counts as poetry, like it or not.

Americans are using poetry in many ways. They use it in teaching—and not just in English class. Anthony Petrosky, poet and professor at the Pittsburgh University School of Education, says that poetry helps make students better thinkers. “Poetry can be an excellent means of teaching people to use details and particulars,” he says. “It makes them better observers.”

They’ve taught engineering at MIT and Cal Tech with poetry. Robert Coles, professor of psychology at Harvard University, has used poems to teach students the art of medicine. Why poems? Coles writes that patients and doctors alike “long for someone’s

help in making sense of it all.” Poems offer “the epiphanies doctors and patients alike crave.” A good doctor needs to know how a dying patient feels. To learn, read just two lines from L. E. Sissman’s poem “A Death Place”:

Very few people know where they will die,
But I do: in a brick-faced hospital

Sissman, who died of cancer, knew what he was writing about.

One place poetry directly benefits people is in therapy. Dan Gottlieb, a psychologist and the host of *Voices in the Family* on National Public Radio, uses poetry in healing. “Many of my guest therapists use poems. I use them all the time,” he says. One of his callers, an exhausted, distraught woman trying to care for a schizophrenic family member, declared that none of her love and work could get a response. Gottlieb responded with Richard Wilbur’s poem “The Writer.” The last three lines spoke to and for her:

It is always a matter, my darling,
Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish
What I wished you before, but harder.

“It’s one of my favorites,” Gottlieb says, “and I’ve used it in many settings. A poem I find myself using a lot lately is the Maya Angelou poem. Three lines in particular seem to hit a chord with many of the people I work with:

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

That’s talking about nations, and it’s talking about people.”

Because it is so hard to speak of the human heart directly, the therapist, like the poet, must turn to metaphors. “What I do for a living is to speak to people’s hearts,” Gottlieb says. “Poets do that courageously and directly. There lies a deep healing power in the way metaphors communicate. My patients speak in metaphors. Their dreams are metaphors. That’s why poetry speaks directly

to them, consciously and unconsciously.” And poetry lets us know we do not suffer by ourselves. “Reading poems can make people feel less alone with their problems,” Gottlieb says, “You know somebody else in the past has been where you are.”

Some use poems to be better at business. Dana Gioia, once an executive with General Foods and now a full-time poet and critic, is mindful of belonging to a line of American business people who were also poets. (Wallace Stevens was an executive for Hartford Accident and Indemnity, and T. S. Eliot was a foreign-exchange correspondent for Lloyd’s Bank.) In Gioia’s poem “The Man in the Open Doorway,” a businessman may drive back to the office to work late

And, thinking of the day’s success,
Trace his steps once more,

Then pause in a darkened stairway
Until the sounds of his steps have ceased
And stroke the wall as if it were
Some attendant beast.

Here’s the paradox: Poetry is everywhere—but where is poetry? Not on TV. Not on radio. If poetry has exploded, the explosion has been pretty quiet. Perhaps other things are performing the role poetry once played. Peter Oresick, assistant director and promotion and marketing manager for the University of Pittsburgh Press, says that “poetry’s social role has been usurped by other media—especially the popular song, which has done more to take away from the role of poetry than anything else.” Once it was Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, the Beatles; today, it might be the Indigo Girls, U2, Ice-T. Go out on any schoolyard and be amazed as seven-year-olds recite the latest rap song word for word, rhythm for rhythm.

Poetry has long held an uneasy place in our culture. Many are the reasons. The poet Gerald Stern says, “It may be a throwback to the Puritan ethic: people are uncomfortable with anything that doesn’t seem to have an immediate use.” This is partly the fault of the poets. The first half of this century saw the rise of austere, dif-

difficult poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. And some poets continue to write intellectual, baffling poetry that is assured of a very small audience. But not all poets write this way. Poet Vikram Seth says, “Really, it strikes me as unfair of so many professional poets to insist on being so difficult.”

Children and adolescents are deeply drawn to poetry. But then something terrible happens. Michael J. Bugeja, poet and professor at the E. W. Scripps School of Journalism, surveyed his students to determine the reasons they had stopped liking poetry. One-third of them reported giving up when teachers criticized their interpretations.

“As teachers,” Bugeja says, “we have to ask ourselves what in heck we’re doing when we present a poem, the student expresses some joy in the poem, and is told, ‘You’re wrong! You get an F!’”

Which of the following false truisms did you learn in school?



- ✘ All poetry rhymes.
- No poetry rhymes anymore.
- ✘ Poetry is primarily a way to express yourself.
- No: Poetry speaks for all humanity.
- ✘ Poetry is a great repository of emotions.
- No: Ideas, yeah, that’s it, ideas.
- ✘ Well, OK then, stories.
- No, no: It’s images, whatever they are.

All are true, all are garbage. Worst of all is the idea that poetry is something that should be analyzed. Too often the result is that, in Oresick’s words, “poetry is the one art form that consistently makes people feel stupid.”

There’s a national movement to change how poetry is taught. Gioia calls on high school and college teachers to “spend less time on analysis and more on performance.” Poems should be “memorized, recited, and performed,” he writes, to get back to the sheer “sensual excitement of speaking and hearing the words of the poem.” Bugeja says, “I’d encourage teachers, please, to put more focus on appreciating poetry and less on explicating and interpreting it.”

Perhaps the next generation of schoolchildren will learn that poetry can, in Oresick’s words, “make you smile as much as any TV can.”



A Bowl of Reasons

There are four reasons for you to take up poetry.

Pleasure. Poetry can give you intense pleasures you can't get anywhere else. When, in his poem "Among School Children," W. B. Yeats writes

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

it's supposed to give you pleasure. Poetry can truly intoxicate. Emily Dickinson once wrote, "If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that this is poetry."

Not an especially dainty thing for our Emily to say!

There's more to pleasure than self-pleasure. Pleasure also leads to

Truth. A popular prejudice holds that poetry is somehow not "in touch" with the world. Bunk.

Many folks read poetry to learn the truth about people's lives. Donald Revell says, "Poetry lets you know what you're doing, who you are. It's a form of self-knowledge, a form of mental health."

Open an anthology such as *Working Classics* (see page 88) and you will find in condensed form the essence of hundreds of lives, as in Ed Ochester's poem "The Miners at Revloc":

Coal has entered their skin.
A fine black salt drifts
back into their meals.
Every day the mills are fed
tiny wafers of their flesh.

Now we have learned something about the lives of mine workers.

When life is joyful, poetry is there to say it, as in William Blake's "Infant Joy":

"I have no name,
I am but two days old."
What shall I call thee?
"I happy am,
Joy is my name."
Sweet joy befall thee!

Joy is the truth sometimes. Now, some kinds of truth are to be learned for their own sake, and others are there to be used. That brings us to the idea that

Poetry can help you. It's a possibility. Poetry may help you see your own life more clearly, compare your outlook to that of other people. Vikram Seth is impressed by the way in which people of many cultures turn to poetry for comfort. "At the time of the Cultural Revolution, and again after Tiananmen Square, the Chinese turned to their famous old poets for solace," Seth says. "You find this in Russia, and also in India. Solace is one of the major benefits poetry can give its readers."

People have become friends, formed communities, decided to part, act, procreate, all on the basis of what they have found in poems. Writing a poem, after all, is an active thing—as reading it should be. We think of poetry as passive and inert, when in fact it is anchored in the world and calls us to anchor there too. That is why

Reading poetry is both intensely personal and the ultimate unselfish act. It starts as something you do for yourself—an alternative in the pleasure-round of American culture. Stay with it and you will find that poetry connects you to the world and the people in it.



Reading poetry

is a way of

paying attention.



And paying attention is a good thing to do.

It's a way of being involved, of bridging your own aspirations to those of all humanity.

That could make yours a fuller life—and all for less than \$30. May you read a poem here and there. May it give you pleasure, truth, help, a reason to say, along with Elizabeth Socolow, "I am alive / and kick my heels at the stars."



Welcome to the audience participation segment of this book.

Repeat after me:



Poetry is meant to be read aloud.

Excuse me.

The request was to repeat the line.

Speak it aloud:



Poetry is meant to be read aloud.

Hmmm. We're going to have to stand up and say the words in a distinct, positive voice. If for any reason you can't make it to your feet, make up for it in volume. This is an important sentence you are about to speak. Here's your first **DO IT**, my friend.



Poetry is meant to be read aloud.



We're serious.

Not reading a poem aloud is like not living in your house after you've built it. Why would you do that to a poem? Just leave it sitting there, silent, a bunch of marks on the page? When all it wants to do is leap out of your throat in all the fun and surprise and pleasure it can pack?

Let's be nice to poems—and, more importantly, to ourselves—and read aloud.

All right, not always. Not in the shower, because it will ruin the book. Not in church, because it will ruin your reputation. Not, or at least not always, on the train—check to see whether the people next to you are receptive (or asleep).

But everywhere else, of course. In the library? *Como no?* (Softly.) In the car? As long as you're not driving. In the living room? Well, yes—what, is it a sin to turn off the tube and actually *do* something?